

DATE 2/7/13

HB

To: Representative Ron Ehli, Chair and Committee Members
Joint Appropriations Subcommittee on Health and Human Services
2013 Montana Legislature

From: Aart Dolman, Great Falls, MT 

Date: February 6, 2013

Re: Comments on current crisis of early Child Abuse in Great Falls, MT.

Dear Representative Ehli and Committee Members:

I am a Great Falls resident and an advocate mental health in our community. I am writing you about the ever increasing systemic crisis of child abuse sometimes resulting in death. This has become an important issue in our community.

As a professional historian, I have tried to find the causes to this complex and difficult problem. So I selected the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), implemented in 1997, for a study model but discovered that escape from poverty is a very complicated issue. This program was based upon an earlier ideology of teaching a work ethic to the poor. Escape from poverty was seen as solvable. Now it is in its second generation because children of the first enrollees cannot escape. So often I hear that it is their fault. The stigma against the poor is that if they would only work harder.

First, if one takes into consideration that the cycle of poverty which is now in its present cycle, one finds that the poor work in almost impossible situations. Many workers, often mostly young women, work on part time jobs in the service industry. If one takes TANF into consideration they have multiple children. The mother, or in some cases the father, tend to work long hours on minimum wage. The hours are deliberately set just below full time work and this forces them to depend on emergency health care. They take their children to several day care facilities. Sometimes the live-in partner takes care of small children and it is quite often the case that neither the mother nor her partner has child raising skills.

Second, last year, Dr. Liz Kolsteadt, Chief Clinical Officer, Intermountain, outlined in her testimony to the Interim Committee on Health and Human Services that the first three years of a child are most critical in its development. Our local newspaper and television stations sometimes give a snapshot of those living in poverty. Our society seems to forget that poor families depend upon community and state support. Unless one visits a social institution or a church, the poor including those who suffer from mental illness have the stigma that it is one's personal decision to be poor or sick.

The time has come for the 2013 Legislature seriously to consider that it must fund the Child Care Division of the Department of Public Health and Human Services adequately and find a way to solve the issue of poverty. They have this done in other countries.

Thank you for your cooperation.